Imitation of planning: Strategies to address tenure and economic insecurities in informal settlements of Buenos Aires

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This paper analyses economic and tenure insecurities and risk of eviction in informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It shows how the bottom-up planning initiatives led by community leaders and activists are often motivated by the fact that engagement with or imitation of formal planning regulations and codes increase the perceived tenure security in these settlements. If and when security from eviction is achieved, however, or when households who occupy these lands do not aspire to stay there in the long-term, planning efforts might be ignored or even rejected. In such situations they may refocus their priorities on livelihood strategies and saving.

This research was conducted as an ethnographic case study based on physical and digital fieldworks. The findings urge urban planners to pay more attention to the way in which mainstream planning approaches magnify existing and create new insecurities and informalities, instead of addressing them. Planners need to recognise the gaps between their planning ambitions, and the realities and priorities of people living in informal settlements and shantytowns in situations where the state is unable to ensure access to affordable housing.

Keywords: informality, tenure insecurity, urban planning, informal settlements, Buenos Aires

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Introduction

Uncertainty about housing and the struggle to secure affordable shelter in a long-term perspective can be considered some of the most uncomfortable feelings a human being might experience. Coping with such insecurities, like the risk of losing one's home, often requires informal actions by proactive civil society. Few studies link this concept to housing access and urban planning. This article explores these issues in Buenos Aires. Argentina's capital is an ideal case for studying urban development insecurities due to its recurring economic crises and the normalisation of informal housing and employment as coping mechanisms. While 'emergency' implies a temporary, extraordinary situation, in Argentina, it has become a nearly permanent condition.

As the title of the most recent Human Development Report from 2022 suggests: 'Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping our Future in a Transforming World' (UNDP, 2022), living everywhere is becoming more uncertain and insecure. This might result in more places that will become like Argentina, rather than the other way around. While many urban areas might be considered as good places to live, an increasing number of people are excluded from the spaces and opportunities they offer. This exclusion fosters informal and sometimes illegal development, resulting in substandard housing conditions.

This article aims to respond to the research question of *how economic and tenure insecurities impact the planning and development of informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires*. The qualitative research was conducted on two scales: the metropolitan region and individual settlements. Three case areas were studied: Villa 31 shantytown, Costa Esperanza informal settlement, and a contested land occupation in Guernica.

The article begins with an overview of the theoretical grounding, highlighting the disconnect between theory and practice. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological approach and ethics. Next, the research context and case study locations are introduced, emphasising the differences between centrally located shantytowns and suburban or peripheral informal settlements. The main section analyses the most pressing insecurity – risk of eviction – and its impact on housing access and planning through four different settlement typologies. The final sections discuss the findings and propose ideas for further research.

Urban informality as planning?

> One ought not to see formality as the normal state of affairs.
> (Altrock, 2012, p. 185)

According to Altrock (2012), '[t]o speak of informality only makes sense if there is something like formalisation that has led to formality' (p. 173). Roy (2005) argues that informality is not a sector or 'object of state regulation' but a 'state of exception' or governance mode 'produced by the state itself' (p. 149). The characteristic features of informality as a phenomenon, or way of life is that it is highly adaptive to different situations (AlSayyad, 2004).

Altrock (2012) identifies two dimensions of informality: complementary and supplementary. Complementary informality *fills gaps* not covered by formal rules and supports formal institutions. Supplementary informality *replaces* ineffective formal regulations, creating a parallel system with its own rules and norms to achieve social order and prosperity. Roy (2005) defines urban informality as 'an organising logic, a system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself' (p. 148). While Roy emphasises how informality produces and

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regulates space, Altrock (2012) highlights the interrelations between spaces and overlapping informal non-spatial activities, especially between shelter and work. Similarly, Abramo (2012) describes urban informality as 'an aggregate of irregularities' (p. 41) around institutions, laws, rights, norms, and practices.

Applying the theory of informality as continuity to urban spaces, Altrock (2012) claimed that no space is purely formal or informal; instead, people live in hybrid modes combining both. Contemporary studies define informality as a continuum (AlSayyad, 2004; Altrock, 2012; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2021), often described as 'hybrid formal-informal arrangements' (Altrock, 2012, p. 171), the combination of 'formal rules and social norms' (Sanyal, n.d., p. 2), or 'gray spaces', which are

> developments, enclaves, populations and transactions positioned between the 'lightness' of legality/approval/safety and the 'darkness' of eviction/destruction/death (Yiftachel, 2009, p. 250).

The significance of urban informality in the contemporary world cannot be overstated. As cities grow and more urban policies and plans are being approved, so does the informal mode of development become more profound. In many regions of the world, a major part of urban spaces is still shaped by informal practices (Ortiz Flores, 2012; Sennett et al., 2018; UN-Habitat, 2022).

Informal settlements, such as slums, squatter settlements or shantytowns, represent urban informality and often develop outside formal planning norms, with lower quality of life indicators compared to regular neighbourhoods. Despite evolving over time, as long as their living conditions lag behind official housing standards, they are deemed unworthy of habitation (Gilbert, 2007). These standards are often 'guided by international policies and agencies' (Echavarria et al., 2021, p. 16), meaning that they are in many cases detached from the context of the place. Typical to informal settlements and places with inadequate housing is the lack of tenure security, which means insufficient 'protection against forced evictions, harassment and other threats' (UN-Habitat & OHCHR, 2009, p. 4).

Informality poses an epistemological challenge for planners (Roy, 2005). Often seen as 'unplannable', uncontrollable, exceptional or foreign, informal spaces present a complex urban reality where planners must both prevent informal development and integrate these spaces when they emerge. However, many planners fail to acknowledge how formalisation and planning contribute to informality. The eternal condition of informality in these 'gray spaces', which are 'waiting 'to be corrected', puts them 'in a state of "permanent temporariness"' (Yiftachel, 2009, p. 251).

Informal development does not always mean a lack of planning. Recent research indicates that communities in informal settlements are increasingly involved in informal planning and development practices (Sennett et al., 2018). This bottom-up approach is often a response to the formal planning system. Residents, particularly community leaders, demonstrate a good understanding of planning processes and methods, but they usually apply them outside the formal system (Hamdi, 2004; Holston, 2009; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015; Shrestha & Aranya, 2015; Kaika, 2017). De Souza (2006) called this 'grassroots urban planning' and noted how in Brazil

> civil society does not only criticize (as a 'victim' of) state-led planning, but also can directly and (pro)actively conceive and, to some extent, implement solutions independently of the state apparatus (p. 327).

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For Miraftab (2009), contexts of struggles for citizenship tend to radicalise these actions further into an 'insurgent' way of planning, which is based on the principles of 'counter-hegemonic, transgressive and imaginative' practice (p. 32). The question of urban citizenship and informal responses to the struggle for shelter is also integral to discussions on the Right to the City and Right to Housing (Bhan, 2009; Holston, 2009; Harvey, 2013; Rolnik, 2014; Cutts & Moser, 2015; Muñoz, 2018).

Studying such informal, emergent as well as incremental building and development practices can provide useful insight for planners (Roy, 2005; Holston, 2009; Watson, 2009; Hernández et al., 2010). Davoudi (2015) claims that:

> Informal rules, which may not act as instructions, can also influence practical judgement by providing planners with a rich archive of prior experiences as well as what is considered 'appropriate' (p. 326).

Such learning potentials relate to both the processes and products of planning. The former is about the way in which decisions about shared spaces are made, executed and followed up autonomously by the communities themselves (Watson, 2002, 2003; Hamdi, 2010; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015). The later has to do with the design, structure, use of space, as well as the choice of building materials and methods, which are often inspired by indigenous traditions, pragmatic responses to the local needs, or contextual characteristics of the places, such as local land use, landscape features or hydrological cycles (Habraken, 2000; Bredenoord & van Lindert, 2010; Mehrotra et al., 2017). In these cases, social capital becomes a crucial resource for securing housing and well-being (Putnam, 2001).

Challenging the planning sequence

Access to shelter through informal means is often conceptualised as the reverse of what is accepted as the formal housing process. The rich normally begin with buying the property and acquiring the title deed, building the house (or having it built) and finally moving to a finished house with all the service connections. The poor, however, do it the other way around: they move into the land first (often illegally), then build a shack to live in, connect to basic infrastructure and at the end, if allowed to stay, attempt to buy the occupied land and obtain formal title deeds. Such patterns have been documented in Africa (McLeod, 2001), South Asia (Hamdi, 2010) and Latin America (de Paula et al., 2010).

The formal housing process follows a logical sequence with high certainty, while the informal approach is marked by risk, conflict, unpredictability, and insecurity. However, due to exclusionary housing markets and policies, informal housing often becomes the only affordable option for many (Roy, 2005). It is highly adaptable and flexible to the local needs and conditions (Hamdi, 2004), occurring mainly in peripheral areas, though it is not uncommon to observe it near city centres. The location and permanence of such housing depend on factors like land availability, local authorities' tolerance, and job accessibility (Turner, 1972; Gilbert, 2019).

Informal housing construction, often termed 'self-help', involves occupants building some or all of the structure themselves, with or without professional assistance (Gilbert, 2019). Pelli (1994) categorised self-help construction into autonomous, directed, and assisted modes. This process typically occurs incrementally, with house expansions and modifications evolving over time depending on changing household needs, saving capacities, and tenure situation (Turner, 1976; Greene & Rojas, 2008; Ward et al., 2015). In the consolidation and densification of informal settlements, basic infrastructure, public spaces, marketplaces, and commerce may

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emerge spontaneously or through informal planning or agreements (Hamdi, 2004). In Latin America, between 30 and 60 percent of all housing has been built informally (Sette Whitaker Ferreira et al., 2020). According to Gilbert (2005), this way of building 'has been highly effective in making up for the deficiencies of both the market and the government' but at the same time such housing may not be good enough to 'withstand "natural" disasters"' (p. 43).

Standards as guides or barriers?

Turner was one of the first who disagreed with the mainstream negative perceptions of slums and the idea of eradicating them. He further criticised both massive provision of housing in a modernist fashion and 'authoritarian housing systems', which are 'impractical in economies of scarcity' (Turner, 1972, p. 169). He argued that informal, low-quality housing results from unrealistic and unmet standards of what dwelling should be and what services it should have.

Turner (1972; 1976) argued that in this context of prohibitive housing standards, low-income groups themselves produce the best housing, as they use their resources efficiently and transform their dwellings according to the changing household priorities. As he demonstrated, these needs and priorities are much different from the middle- and upper-class families (Figure 1). The poorest households prioritise strategic location, which would enable access to job opportunities that would help them get out of their difficult living conditions. Since their livelihood strategy focuses on maximising saving capacities, decent quality housing with infrastructure connections and freehold ownership may be inconvenient, because that contributes to increased expenses.

As household economic capacities improve, the desire for homeownership becomes relevant. Formal property ownership is viewed as an asset for protection against uncertainty, demonstration of social status, or capital for future generations. These shifts in priorities reflect insecurities and risks, including eviction, income loss, limited mobility, and other daily struggles faced by the poor, who are excluded from formal planning and market systems.
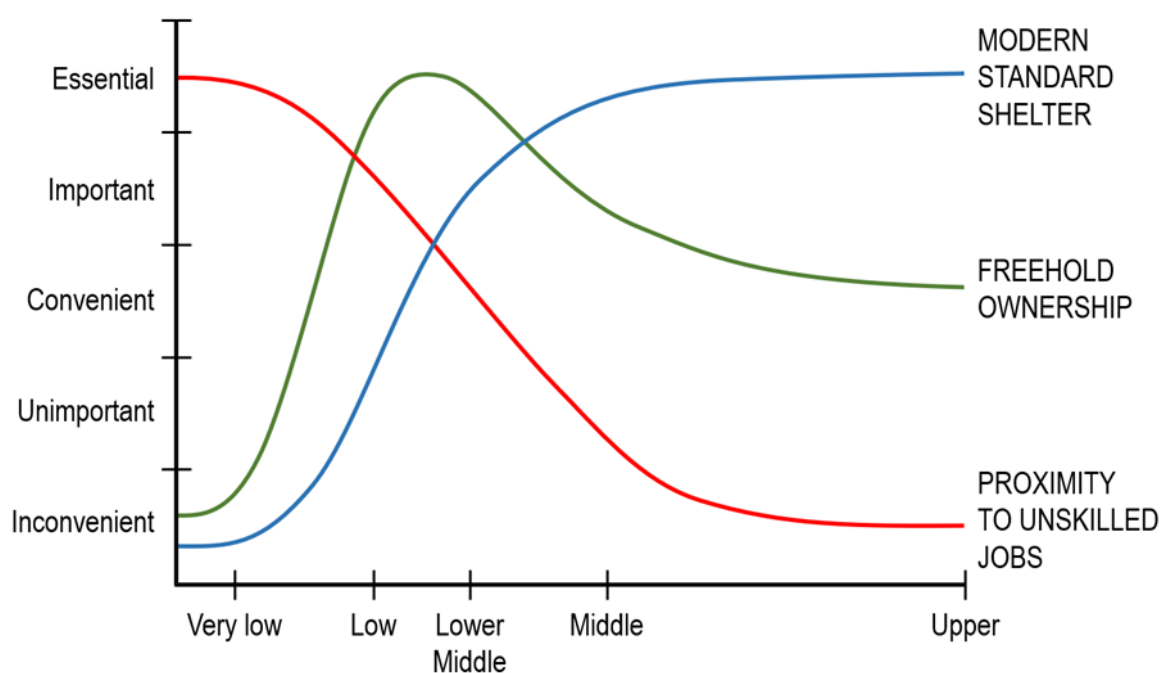

Figure 11. *Priorities for housing needs according to income level. Adapted from Turner (1972)*

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The problem, according to Turner (1972; 1976) is that housing and planning institutions often fail to recognise or address the priorities of the lowest-income families. Instead, they design policies aimed at households with sufficient savings for mortgage payments on finished dwellings. Since waiting for housing subsidies or saving enough money takes too long, many families opt for illegal and informal housing alternatives.

Turner (1976) proposes that individuals and families should have the freedom and control to choose the best housing option and be able to evaluate the alternatives according to their own priorities and needs, or what housing *does* for them. Achieving this requires scrapping the minimum required housing standards:

> The modern minimum standard concept, which acts as a barrier to development by attempting to prohibit the intermediate stages, must give way to a concept which uses standards as guides toward the progressive achievement of minimum goals (Turner, 1976, p. 179–180).

Turner's ideas gained global recognition in 1976 at the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, 'Habitat I'. He was among the first to recognise the planning capabilities of residents in informal settlements. His legacy includes in situ slum upgrading and the so-called sites-and-services projects (Gilbert, 2019; Satterthwaite, 2020).

Turner's neo-anarchist perspective has faced challenges from both the radical left and neoliberal camps. The former accuse him of failing to address the structural issues of the capitalist economic and political system, which perpetuate class struggles and housing inequalities (Burgess, 1978). Pradilla (1983) criticised Turner's ideas to scrap standards and promote the self-help housing production, arguing that his approach justifies self-exploitation of the working class, because they contribute their time and energy to develop housing *in addition* to their regular jobs and reproductive tasks, without being remunerated for it. Others contend that the self-help approach and disregard for building standards have provided governments with an excuse to withdraw from their obligation to ensure decent housing for all (van Lindert, 2016; Gilbert, 2019).

The lure of land titling and formalisation

While many neoliberal thinkers agreed with Turner that informal housing should not be eradicated, they proposed a different approach to housing improvement. Hernando de Soto (2001) rejected Turner's emphasis on the use-value of housing, arguing that housing is primarily a commodity to be exchanged on the market. He believed that capitalist markets, through the trickle-down effect, would elevate living standards for the urban poor. De Soto emphasised the urgent need to regularise informal housing and integrate it into the formal property market. This measure would unlock 'invisible capital,' adding surplus value to these properties by recognising them as assets in virtual financial systems. The poor could then leverage this capital to access loans or trade for other properties. De Soto's ideas gained endorsement from the World Bank (Deininger, 2003), influencing policies in many Global South countries and leading to large-scale titling and formalisation campaigns, especially in peripheral informal settlements. This also contributed to the government gradually withdrawing as a housing provider.

De Soto's viewpoint faced even stronger critiques than Turner's. Gilbert (2002) argued that legitimate housing transactions and financing mechanisms are not uncommon in informal settlements, and land titles are often not enough to obtain formal loans. Housing quality may depend more on sufficient income than formal property title (Payne, 2002; Roy, 2005; Harvey, 2013; Ryan-Collins et al., 2017). Contrary to common perception, formal property ownership

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does not necessarily ensure tenure security and does little to prevent gentrification and displacement driven by market forces (Roy, 2005; Payne et al., 2009). Moreover, formalising tenure often exacerbates socio-spatial segregation (Lees et al., 2016). Displacement is especially common when formalisation is accompanied by infrastructure upgrading, further contributing to housing unaffordability (van Lindert, 2016; Satterthwaite, 2020).

Many point out that it is not formal ownership, but tenure security or guarantees of protection from eviction, which encourage housing improvement and investment (Gilbert 2002; Varley, 2002; Satterthwaite, 2020). Furthermore, land titling processes are often slow, complex, and expensive (Payne et al., 2009). The shortcomings of formalisation have been recognised by the World Bank, which gradually shifted its policy recommendations towards a more proactive role of the state in housing provision and regulation (Buckley & Kalarickal, 2006). To address the issues of unaffordability of housing in the formal property market causing informal land occupations, many scholars suggest implementing collective property ownership models, such as community land trusts (Payne, 2002; UN-Habitat, 2015; Wily, 2018; Arnold et al., 2020; Davis & Fernández, 2020; Rodríguez, 2021).

Informality and insecurity as product of planning

> Yet, the formal and the legal are perhaps better understood as fictions, as moments of fixture in otherwise volatile, ambiguous, and uncertain systems of planning. In other words, informality exists at the very heart of the state and is an integral part of the territorial practices of state power. (Roy, 2009, p. 84).

This excerpt from Roy's diagnosis of the urban condition in India makes a rather unexpected and, for many planners and architects, an inconvenient shift of thinking, where informality and insecurity are not exception, but the norm. Urban informality is often portrayed as 'bad', while its role in correcting the inefficiencies of the formal sector is not sufficiently communicated to planning practitioners and policymakers. These groups often treat informality as an external challenge to be addressed through planning, formalisation and centralised housing provision. As informalities and insecurities are usually treated as challenges for planning, they are often the results of the act of planning itself. Building on these challenges, this paper aims to contribute to the question of *does less planning and more relaxed standards lead to more or less informality and insecurity*?

The paper responds to a lack of recent studies that analyse how the typologies and decision making around informal settlements change over time, as seen from the perspectives of both the state and the community actors. It attempts to revisit the well-established theories on informal development by Turner, de Soto and others, by applying them to case studies in Buenos Aires. This city was selected for its diverse range of informal settlement typologies, both established and recent, providing a rich context for studying these phenomena.

Methods and ethics

The general methodological approach to conduct this study applied multi-level urban ethnography (Irwin, 2010; Duneier et al, 2014) based on qualitative case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2014). It assumes an inductive approach (Davoudi, 2015), where writing and theorising is done *from*, and not *about* places (Watson 2009a; Bhan, 2019). All primary and secondary data were gathered between 2019 and 2023. Three physical fieldworks in Buenos Aires were conducted, lasting between two and five months each. Additionally, data collection continued remotely during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

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The main methods applied this study were face-to-face and remote interviews and focus groups. Of the total of 44 conversations, 24 were conducted in person and 20 remotely. 17 of the physical conversations were done with single individuals, four with two individuals and the remaining three were focus groups with three or four participants. Regarding gender balance, 29 of the 46 research participants were women and 17 were men. Additionally, interviews were classified into two groups: 'expert' and 'community'. The former classification applied to 26 interviews and all three focus groups, while the latter applied to the remaining 15 interviews. To track certain processes over time, repeated interviews were conducted with selected study participants representing each group and case area. This data was supplemented by notes and photographs from site visits in over 50 settlements and 19 extensive transect walks. An important source of data were satellite images, secondary documents and relevant literature.

The analytical approach drew from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008) and process tracing, emphasising the temporal dimension and change over time (Gubrium & Holstein, 2010; Beach & Pedersen, 2013). Five narratives, one for each case study area and two for the general metropolitan level, were generated. Several rounds of coding were conducted before and after drafting the case narratives. Themes identified in the thematic analysis were both data-driven and theory-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

The initial coding exercises followed predefined categories, such as organising information based on the type of case study and chronologically in a timeline (see Maxwell & Miller, 2010). Subsequent coding took on a more exploratory nature. The data was structured thematically and chronologically within each case, allowing categories to emerge organically during the process. These categories formed the basis for narratives detailing the development of the case areas and the roles and behaviours of stakeholders. The finished narrative texts were then analysed to identify one-sentence insights. In the final coding round, these insights from all narratives were thematically structured and labelled according to the settlement typology they pertained to.

The first outcome of the analysis was conceptualising the tenure and economic insecurities in the studied areas. By contextualizing these insecurities geographically and temporally, four typologies were defined for the different types of settlements based on their location (central and peripheral) and stage of development (recent occupations and consolidated settlements). The analysis section of this paper is organised according to these typologies.

The author's positionality[1] as a non-local and non-native Spanish speaking researcher implied both disadvantages and advantages. The primary practical challenge involved limited understanding of certain local terms and expressions in their full depth. To address this, the author diversified the dataset to allow data triangulation and consulted with research partners from Argentina to clarify any doubts. Additionally, the author engaged with a diverse range of informants across various political affiliations, preferences, genders, ages, and professions to mitigate bias.

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[1] The author is a white male researcher employed at a European university and acknowledges his privileged position, potentially raising concerns about reproducing neocolonialist power-relations (Pels & Salemink, 1994; Fife, 2005). Mitigation action included spontaneous co-production of knowledge with informants to reduce traditional power relations (Mitlin & Bartlett, 2018) and remaining flexible to accommodate for the needs and preferences of the participants, as well as repeatedly sharing findings in accessible language and format. At the same time, the author's situation enabled easier access to some information and participants explaining situations more clearly to outside researchers (see Dowling, 2010).

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Context

Informal settlements and shantytowns

There are two main types of neighbourhoods for the poor in Buenos Aires: inner-city shantytowns and peripheral informal settlements (Abramo, 2012; Figure 2). The difference is not only in their densities and urban forms, but also how they are planned and managed.
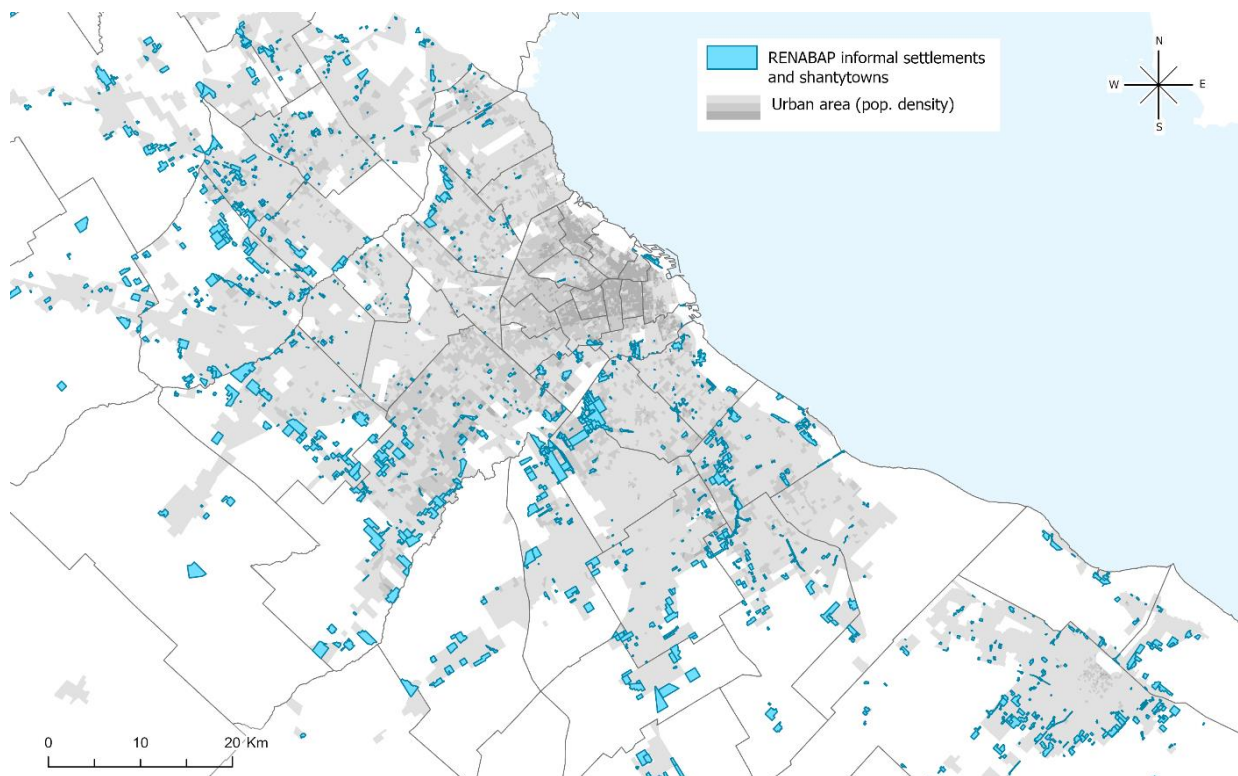

Figure 12. Location of informal settlements and shantytowns in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, according to the RENABAP registry. Data from: Ministerio de Desarrollo Social / INDEC / IGN

Shantytowns, locally referred to as *villas*, are land takeovers that happen in a spontaneous way, typically on smaller, irregularly shaped vacant land within the previously developed area (such as unused railway and port properties) close to major employment centres. The first such occupations emerged around the 1920s, but their most rapid growth started in the 1980s when the new democratic government halted unpopular and violent eradication of shantytowns practised by the last military dictatorship. As there was little planning beforehand, their layout is more organic, with many curved, narrow and dead-end streets and passageways. This dense urban structure may resemble mediaeval town centres, though informality in the shantytowns in Buenos Aires is much more visible. One of the reasons that explains their irregular character is the fact that they were primarily meant for temporary residence.

In Greater Buenos Aires, informal settlements (*asentamientos informales*) often represent horizontal extensions of the city. Their emergence can be traced back to a decision by the military dictatorship in 1977, which prohibited the development of popular suburban subdivisions without infrastructure connections, known as *loteos populares*. The government's requirement for upgraded housing standards led to higher property prices, making land and housing unaffordable for many working-class families.

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Informal settlements often imitate *loteos populares* in several ways. While occupants may be unable to install necessary infrastructure before moving in, the spatial layouts of such settlements typically follow regular grid street networks and legally permitted lot structures. Most land takeovers are conducted by groups of poor families and their corresponding organisations or political movements. However, some may be initiated by opportunists, criminal groups, or 'pirate' developers who sell subdivided lots in informal property markets to confused or desperate families unaware of the ownership situation.

Over time, many legitimised informal settlements consolidate and acquire necessary infrastructure connections. In both formal and informal settlements, housing quality and level of consolidation can vary, influenced by household prosperity and the settlement's age. These characteristics often make it difficult to distinguish between formally and informally planned areas. What is typical to most informal settlements is not easy to spot at first: their origins as illegal occupation and higher risk of eviction. Nevertheless, inhabitants of these areas see them as places of permanent residence and hope that they will eventually be fully integrated with the rest of the city.

As a result of new economic crises and the lack of housing alternatives, many communities in Buenos Aires continue to take over land illegally in peripheral areas or enter the informal housing market in shantytowns. While illegal occupation might be the only affordable housing option, it comes with increased risks related to the unclear legal status of the occupied property or insufficient protection of tenure, which may result in evictions or market-driven expulsions. The conflicts concerning the right to stay on occupied territories are contested. In Argentina, both the right to dignified housing and the protection of private property are embedded in the national constitution and local charters, even though these rights are in many ways contradictory. This makes the outcome of court rulings around evictions very unpredictable and subject to free interpretation of the judges. Hence, the following analysis examines the strategies illegal occupants employ to safeguard their right to stay and address this insecurity.

Case settlements

The research was conducted across metropolitan, local, and contextual scales. In addition to examining the general situation, three settlements were selected for in-depth study (see Table 1 and Figure 3). These areas vary in terms of their location – central, suburban, and peripheral – and have developed at different points in time.

Table 1. Main characteristics and locations of case settlements. Data from INDEC/IGN

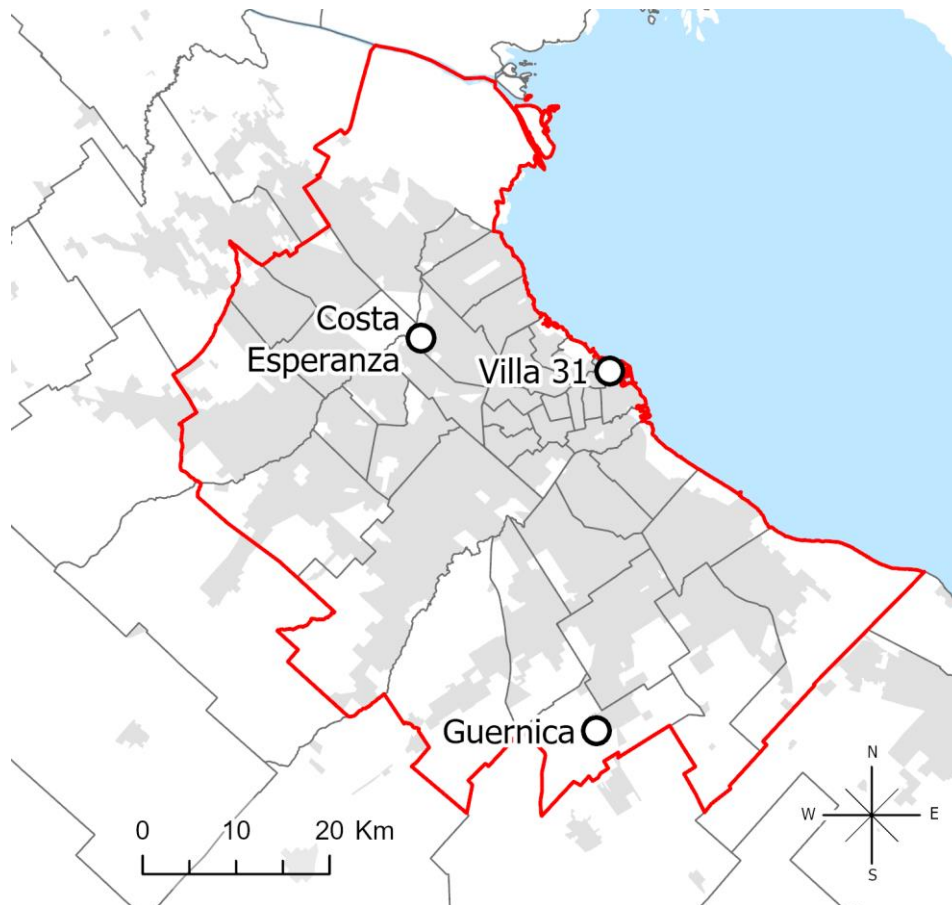| Name	Origin	Settlement type	Estimated population	Size
Villa 31 (alt. Barrio 31, Barrio Padre Mujica)	1930s	Shantytown	60,000	32 ha
Costa Esperanza (Including Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo)	1997	Informal Settlement	30,000	95 ha
Guernica	2020	Informal Settlement	10,000	100 ha

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Figure 3. Location of case study areas. Data from: ESRI/IGN

Villa 31 (Figures 4 and 5) is the oldest, largest, and the most well-known shantytown in Argentina, established on railway and port properties near the Buenos Aires city centre. It is characterised by high land values, densification, rapid demographic shifts and political conflicts, both internally and externally. In addition to formalisation of land tenure, the upgrading scheme proposed and implemented by the city government includes insertion of landmark buildings, tourist destinations, facade improvements and new public spaces. Much of that has been developed in collaboration with international consultancies and private investors.

Costa Esperanza (Figures 6 and 7) is among the largest and most precarious informal settlements in Greater Buenos Aires, located in the San Marín municipality along the Reconquista river and under high voltage power lines. The oldest part of the settlement has a regular street network that connects to adjacent neighbourhoods, which were developed earlier as *loteos populares*. The activity of government planning agencies in Costa Esperanza during both the original takeover and further development has been sporadic, which contributed to maintaining its informal character. In recent years, expansion toward the river has given rise to sectors Costa del Lago and 8 de Mayo, characterised by a more disorderly and unplanned structure. Predominantly inhabited by Paraguayan migrants, the community often sends a significant portion of their earnings back to their homeland.

Guernica (Figures 8 and 9) was a very large and organised land takeover, which happened in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic in the peripheries of Buenos Aires. Despite developing

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a spatial plan and proposal for future formalisation that takes into consideration valid laws and planning codes, the settlement was evicted 101 days after its first occupation.

Figure 4. Images from Villa 31. Author: Marcin Wojciech Sliwa

Figure 5. Villa 31 and the local context. Imagery © Maxar Technologies

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Figure 6. Images from Costa Esperanza. Author: Marcin Wojciech Sliwa

Figure 7. Costa Esperanza and the local context. Imagery ©: Maxar Technologies

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Figure 8. Images from Guernica. Author (from top left): Agustina Byrne / Leandro Teysseire / Sebastián Linero / Adrían Escandar

Figure 9. Guernica and the local context. Imagery © Maxar Technologies

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Analysis of tenure insecurity in four settlement typologies

Tenure insecurity

The coding of data resulted in three main factors that impact informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires. The most important is tenure insecurity, which materialises in risks of eviction, gentrification and unclear legal status of the property. Housing tenure can be understood as the assurance of long-term right to live in a dwelling, while insecurity indicates the struggle for achieving such a comforting condition. Therefore, tenure insecurity is about not knowing whether one can stay permanently on the land or in the house.

Other significant factors include economic insecurity (poverty, unstable income, unaffordability) and political uncertainty (changing policies, governance crises, lack of participation, unclear actor roles). Despite high Covid-19 infection rates, health risks and unsanitary conditions were considered less important. Environmental issues (contamination, climate change, natural hazards) were not prioritised by the informants in the case areas.

Consequently, the analysis focuses on tenure insecurity. This includes the strategies that communities who engage in what the authorities consider illegal occupation, apply to mitigate actual or potential conflicts with property owners and secure their right to housing. These range from organising physical resistance or self-defence, to initiating community-driven informal (bottom-up) urban planning processes or active engagement in the state-led formal (top-down) planning. The response of urban planners to these efforts, especially in minimising eviction or market-driven expulsion, is also examined.

The analysis identified four typologies based on the settlements' development stages. The main differences between the typologies are: perceived or legal tenure security, aspiration for temporary or permanent residence, and degree of centrality.

Typology 1: Permanent residence and high risk of eviction in suburbs or peripheries

> People entered as if nothing happened, with sticks… They put thread on the ground and marked how many metres, how many metres each, and left space for the streets.
> (Community leader in Costa Esperanza recalling the original land invasion in the 1990s)

The first typology includes land invasions and informal settlements in suburban and peripheral areas shortly after initial occupation, where residents aspire to attain long-term or permanent residency. Examples include Costa Esperanza in its early years and Guernica land takeover.

In these cases, insecurity around the high risk of eviction motivates those who engage in land takeovers to plan and imitate spatial planning models similar to the *loteos populares* scheme, which was a very common affordable housing strategy until it was banned in 1977. Those who initiate illegal occupations try as much as possible to ensure spatial order that is in line with applicable urban codes. This can materialise in ensuring uniform lot sizes and regular street networks that connect to the formal settlements nearby and extend the typical development patterns originating in Buenos Aires' colonial grid structure. Other examples include applying the right building setbacks or reserving space for future parks, schools and other public facilities.

The reasoning behind imitating the 'planned city' is to show how these emergent settlements can easily be transformed into regular neighbourhoods. Such action is driven by the

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anticipation of future recognition, formalisation, integration and upgrading with infrastructure. This way of self-organisation and pre-planning has become a common strategy that aims first and foremost at securing protection from evictions and ensuring the right for long-term residence. It succeeded in Costa Esperanza and other settlements but failed in Guernica. In these cases, the idea of creating orderly and tranquil neighbourhoods was also important but seen as less urgent and given lower priority in face of the risks and uncertainties around possible evictions. Therefore, addressing tenure insecurity is the main factor that motivated actions and choices before and during the initial occupations.

Regardless of whether the occupation happened all at once or in an incremental matter, key factors in these actions are community organisation capacities and solidarity. The success of lobbying strategies depends primarily on rigorous respect for prior agreements, mutual support, and political mobilisation. This explains why many of the takeovers have been undertaken jointly by communities that have known each other before, for example because they already used to be neighbours or because they belonged to the same political movement. Likewise, weak leadership and spatial chaos increases the probability of eviction.

Furthermore, the initiators of land occupations chose the places and timing of takeovers strategically based on prior investigation of property ownership situation and evaluation of eviction risk. As a rule, settling on state-owned land was preferred over private land, because democratic governments are more willing to negotiate directly with the occupants, as they recognise the difficulty of ensuring affordable housing alternatives. Private landowners typically view occupations as property rights violations and involve law enforcement or courts. Occupants also target land that is abandoned or has unclear ownership situation, hoping for property rights through uninterrupted residence. Regarding timing of the occupations, some leaders waited for favourable conditions that would make quick evictions less likely. For example, the initial occupation of Costa Esperanza happened during a period of local governance crisis, shortly after the removal of a mayor hostile to illegal occupations.

Another manifestation of tenure insecurity is in the way in which the occupants had to move in and stay on the occupied land from the first day of occupation. Otherwise, since tenure was informal, they could risk losing their lot to someone else. It was also important that the families consolidate their settlements fast and are present in their homes during the eviction operations because that would attract media attention and mobilise activists who support their cause. This would result in a more widespread criticism of the brutality of the government and pressure to postpone or withdraw eviction plans.

Communities in these areas have expressed that they do not demand the land for free, but they are willing to negotiate purchasing the occupied lots at an affordable price. They may not necessarily want to assume costs of mortgage payments right away, but the act of showing interest in paying back for the property is used as an argument to negotiate the right to stay on the occupied territory. In a similar way, affordability can be a challenge when it comes to negotiating formalisation of infrastructure. Communities are proactive when it comes to extending water and electricity connections, though most of the time this happens in an informal or illegal way. Formalised services are seen as a sign of legitimation of tenure, but these are often too expensive or difficult to provide in settlements with unresolved tenure.

Communities enhance their chances of regularisation by preparing spatial plans, surveys, subdivision maps, and intervention proposals. These documents are used in negotiations with local government representatives. In cases like Guernica, local leaders receive assistance from external professionals, academics, and activists to improve their plans and explore legal pathways to resist evictions and legitimise their tenure.

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Similar instances of imposing spatial order informally occur in land occupations led by 'pirate' developers and criminal groups who take over and subdivide land illegally 'on behalf' of poor communities. They imitate formal planning to attract buyers and demand high prices. It is common that they use their connections with local governments or corrupt authorities to ensure protection from eviction and speed up infrastructure upgrading.

In most cases, however, the state-led planning and infrastructure provision do not start until the tenure situation in settlements is resolved. Municipal planners may participate in negotiations for regularisation, resettlement, or peaceful termination of occupation in exchange for housing subsidies but refrain from initiating planning processes to avoid legitimising the (still) illegal occupations. Sometimes local governments may designate abandoned properties for non-housing purposes like urban agriculture to prevent informal settlement expansion.

Forced evictions have done little to stop the problem of illegal occupations. Those expelled often lack affordable alternatives, leading to new, often desperate and less organised takeovers elsewhere. However, many of these new takeovers were more desperate and less organised. This is especially evident in the wave of occupations that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, when evictions were common despite a temporary prohibition of forced expulsion. As the housing crisis grows and the competition for land intensifies, many of the new takeovers happen on less desirable land, such as wetlands and landfills in more remote locations, and have smaller or irregular lot sizes. The chaotic occupation of such land may also be linked to lower perception of eviction risk or lack of aspirations for long-term residence.

Typology 2: Permanent residence and low risk of eviction in suburban or peripheral areas

> It is the most efficient typology to intervene, because it is very easy to enter a street that is already straight, has the permitted dimensions, that already has water regulations like the rest of the city, and that does not need resettlement.
> (Urban planner about working with infrastructure upgrading projects in informal settlements)

The settlements grouped under the second typology have achieved a certain degree of perceived or legal tenure security. They are also meant for permanent residence, but since eviction is no longer a significant risk, the priorities and approaches of the different actors change significantly. This is the case of Costa Esperanza and many other consolidated informal settlements after the local governments legitimised their status as neighbourhoods.

Tenure security may be achieved in different ways. In Costa Esperanza, community leaders negotiated protection from eviction and infrastructure improvements in a political process. This perceived security was strengthened later when the inhabitants received temporary residence certificates, which will eventually be the basis for issuing formal property titles and mortgages. In other settlements, court rulings may establish tenure security. The recent creation of the official national registry of informal settlements (RENABAP) has expanded eviction protection to over 1,000 informal settlements in the metropolitan area.

After securing long-term tenure, the incentive to follow up community-initiated plans decreases. The residents may not prioritise their involvement in planning, as they no longer consider it urgent. Many of them are satisfied with the fact that they no longer need to fear eviction. Their permanence is no longer dependent on neighbourhood mobilisation; therefore, community organisation and the role of local leaders or political opportunists is diminished.

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Upon achieving tenure security, inhabitants' focus often shifts from community organisation to individual needs. Residents in consolidated informal settlements seek freehold ownership and often reject collective ownership schemes, because collective property does not help in building up their financial capital. Secure tenure also incentivises housing improvement and expansion. Makeshift shelters are gradually and incrementally transformed into permanent housing, which adapt to the household needs. Living conditions in many informal settlements which originated in the 1980s and 90s have improved so much that they are no longer part of informal settlement registries. In Costa Esperanza, community organisation and planning interest reemerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, though this was more an emergency response than a collective long-term neighbourhood vision.

As settlements gain legitimacy, state institutions lead planning and infrastructure projects to integrate these regularised settlements into the city. Presence of the state further diminishes the role of community leaders, though in most cases the local governments lack the capacity and resources to plan. Therefore, they are forced to incorporate community actors in the political or administrative planning processes. This makes planning challenging, as its success is subject to economic (budget allocation) and political uncertainties (power relations and party preference/affiliations). In such neighbourhoods, informal development may even outpace government efforts to provide infrastructure connections and formal titles.

Figure 10 illustrates the changing need for or engagement in planning of community and state actors, relative to tenure security and eviction risks. On the left side are new settlements under typology 1, where communities imitate planning to mitigate risks of evictions, while the state avoids planning of what are still illegal occupations. This situation changes when these settlements secure tenure and enter typology 2. In these cases, state institutions take the initiative to plan, while communities often lack the motivation to engage in planning, and in some instances may even find it inconvenient to participate in state-led planning or follow up their own plans. This shows a paradoxical situation where the state is either unwilling to plan when the community demands it or struggles to engage the community members when it initiates planning processes.
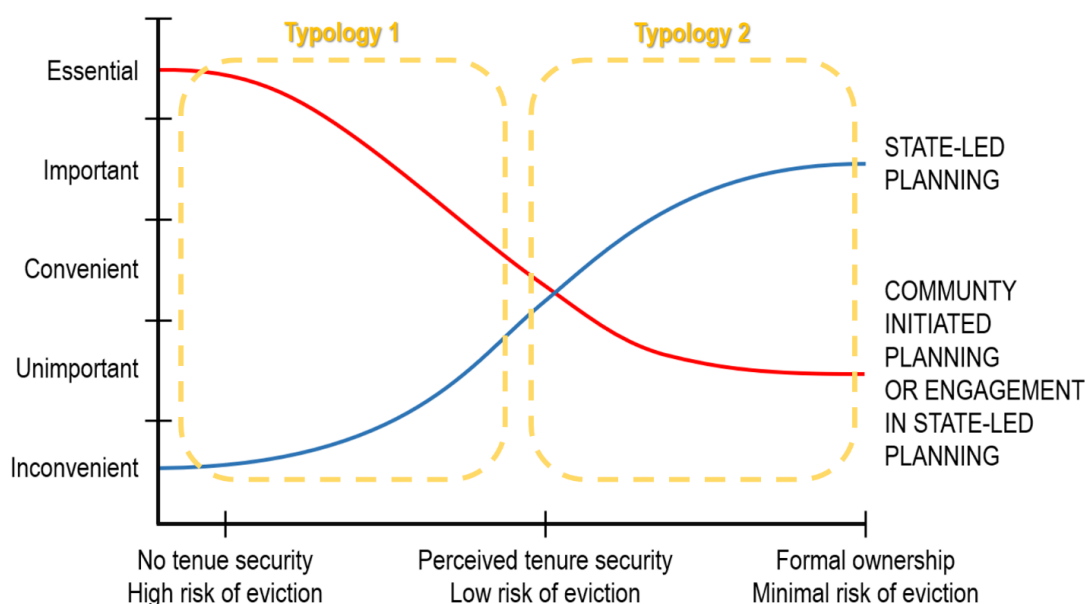

Figure 10. Changing need for or engagement in community initiated (informal) and state-led (formal) planning according to tenure security situation and risk of eviction. Source: the author

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Typology 3: Temporary residence in central areas with insignificant risk of eviction

> Once, the railwaymen tore down and marked houses on the edge of the villa, and then put up a fence defining how far they [the residents] could build. I don't know why. They were told this was because of railway safety. It's fine, but it [the accidents] doesn't happen very often. So, there was another border line, and they started to disobey the railwaymen.
> (Urban planner about the difficulty of controlling the rapid expansion of a new shantytown)

Typologies 1 and 2 concerned suburban and peripheral settlements intended for permanent residence from the initial occupation. However, what happens to transitory settlements, where the majority stays only for short periods? Typology 3 does not follow the development from typology 2 but concerns settlements which offer temporary shelter and where the rotation of residents is high. Examples include Villa 31 and other centrally located shantytowns initiated before the 1990s, along with more recent land takeovers in Costa Esperanza.

In shantytowns, tenure insecurity varied from case to case and across time, though normally it has been relatively high. Nevertheless, the risk of eviction has been insignificant since these areas had served as transitory shelter and the rotation of residents (both those who claimed ownership and tenants) had been frequent anyway. In shantytowns with informal transitory housing, neither the community, nor the state had initiated any planning to ensure spatial order.

Before shantytowns became places of permanent residence for both de-facto owners and tenants, the communities were mobilised almost exclusively to resist eviction operations, when the bulldozers were in front of the houses. Unlike in typology 1, there were no demands for property tenure formalisation. The negotiated alternatives to evictions were monetary compensation or relocation to social housing, though many families rejected the second choice over the more favourable placement of their transitory shelter.

The top priority for households living in any form of transitory informal housing has been access to job opportunities and ability to build up savings quickly. They often choose temporary substandard living conditions to save for a house or land elsewhere, or for immigrant communities, to send remittances or invest in their home countries. In worst cases, due to sudden eviction, insufficient savings, or lack of alternatives, they may seek permanent housing in the peripheries through participating in organised land takeovers or purchasing cheap lots in informal settlements with unclear land ownership (as in typology 1).

While rent in central shantytowns can be high, they offer relaxed entry requirements compared to the formal sector housing. Their proximity to jobs reduces commute times and costs, allowing residents to work longer and save more money. Similarly to areas in typology 2, for most people living in Villa 31 and other shantytowns, informality in housing and work arrangements has been a resource, rather than a burden, at least until they save up enough to move to better housing.

The transitory character of housing has been the main reason why neither the residents nor the state wanted to invest in planning and implementing large interventions. At best, makeshift informal electricity and water connections were done by the community groups to satisfy their immediate needs. However, regardless of the risk of expulsion, they were hesitant to invest too much in housing, sophisticated infrastructure and community spaces. Frequent eviction notices increased the risk of wasted effort. When eviction risk was low, residents preferred to work more and move to better housing as quickly as possible.

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Historically, the state has also perceived shantytowns as providing transitory or emergency shelter and instead of integration and investment, it would rather attempt to resettle the residents to new housing and demolish the old precarious shacks. However, in periods when democratic governments acknowledged their inability to provide decent housing alternatives, they temporarily tolerated informal housing and postponed unpopular evictions. The rather rare cases of infrastructure improvements or promises of tenure formalisation were more often driven by political clientelism than the ambition to transform these areas through urban planning.

During recent crises and the Covid-19 pandemic, many poor families faced such urgent housing needs that they gave up on finding permanent homes, even via organised land occupations. They settled in unsuitable or eviction-prone areas like wetlands or railway lands. The absence of long-term prospects led to minimal planning and resulted in chaotic development.

Typology 4: Transition to permanent residence in central areas with growing eviction risk

> It's always with organisation, getting together, talking about what's coming, studying what we don't understand… Like the word 'gentrification'. We didn't know what that word gentrification meant. Now we know.
> (Community leader in Villa 31 about mobilisation of the residents to engage in the planning process)

The situation described as typology 3 starts to change when shantytowns and other forms of informal transitory housing become places for more permanent long-term residence, due to growing unaffordability of housing in the formal sector. Typology 4 describes areas undergoing this transformation. The gradual shift towards long-term residence applies to both the landlords and tenants. The former recognise the opportunity of earning high income from renting out rooms, while the latter, unable to access the formal housing market, remain in villas. These trends are evident in Villa 31 and other shantytowns in recent decades.

When the expected residence in shantytowns becomes permanent, the need to engage in planning increases. While the length of stay matters, the intentions for initiating planning work differ between the state institutions and the community. The shift to permanent shantytown residence around the 1990s coincided with a planning paradigm shift. This period marked a growing criticism of resettlement to public housing estates, which were often built in in unfavourable and remote locations. The idea of eradicating shantytowns became politically risky and unpopular. More planners and politicians started to recognise these settlements as neighbourhoods and designed plans for in situ upgrading, integration, and formalisation of tenure.

However, enforcing spatial and legal order in chaotic and unplanned shantytowns is challenging. Planners need to face a complex and rapidly changing physical, social, economic, and political environment. Informal development and informalisation is not frozen in time, but compete and often outpace the modest attempts of modernisation and regularisation led by government institutions. As the example of Villa 31 shows, the very generous budget for upgrading and formalisation was insufficient to transform the shantytown into a regular neighbourhood and make structural improvements of the area. In this case, most of the realised plans were the quick, 'easy', and aesthetic interventions.

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Regulating dynamic informal tenure systems and resolving land ownership conflicts present additional challenges. Key issues include creating fair regularisation solutions for rental housing and agreeing on mortgage conditions for shantytown residents to become property owners.

The authorities have made plans that attempt to address these issues, but the success of this work has so far been very limited, because many of these proposals were rejected by the organised community. The credibility of the government has been weak, because of internal disagreements about the actual goals and intentions of planning, and due to unclarity regarding what and how information should be communicated to the communities living there.

The government motivates their actions by the need to integrate these areas into the city, improve infrastructure, and enhance quality of life. However, residents fear that the proposed improvements and formalised tenure may lead to gentrification and gradual expulsion.

Here, centrality plays an important role. In a growing city like Buenos Aires, where the property market is relatively liberalised, zones with high unexploited potential for commercial or residential development, including the area around Villa 31, are under constant pressure from real-estate investors, leading to displacement of low-income groups. This contrasts to settlements in typologies 1 and 2 located in suburban and peripheral locations. These areas are also attractive for private developers, but the pressure is not (yet) as intense as in the city centre.

Residents of Villa 31 engage in planning and political mobilisation to address tenure security and protect their right to stay. So far, the very particular combination of legitimisation of the shantytown by the state and a still informal residence might have served as a way of tenure protection for the community. This advantage was threatened by the new government strategy. Residents criticise the plans for formalising property and infrastructure, arguing these will increase housing costs and emphasise the of lack of sufficient protections against market-driven displacement. Many community leaders go further and interpret the official plans as a deliberate action to open the land for speculation and create conditions for indirect transfer of property ownership to profit-driven third parties. These gentrification threats in shantytowns concern property owners, tenants, and informal entrepreneurs in different ways.

Conflicts with the state cause community groups to reject active participation in the top-down planning scheme. Instead, they initiate their own parallel participatory planning processes where they debate these plans and develop their own alternative solutions and proposals. The main goal of this bottom-up planning is to ensure the right to stay and negotiate more favourable and affordable formalisation conditions. This approach represents another strategy by which communities imitate urban planning to secure their tenure.

Figure 11 demonstrates how the need for engagement in planning, both state- and community-led, increases when expected residence changes from transitory to permanent. On the left side are areas in typology 3, where the majority is living temporarily and does not need, or even want any form of planning. On the right are shantytowns in typology 4, where expected residence becomes more permanent, and the attempts to formalise tenure and infrastructure through top-down planning created new risks of expulsion, which sparked a parallel community mobilisation around planning. Table 2 gives an overview of the main characteristics of all the four typologies.
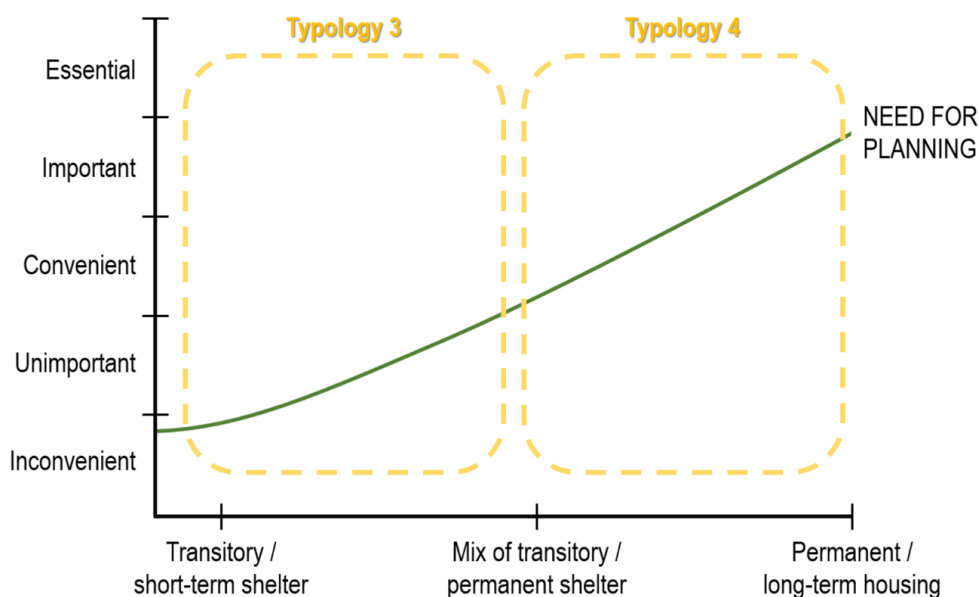
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Figure 11. Changing need for or engagement in planning (initiated by either the community and state) according to the aspirations or expectations of length of stay. Source: the author

Table 2. Comparison of typologies 1–4. Source: the author

	Typology 1	Typology 2	Typology 3	Typology 4
Type of settlement	New informal settlements	Legitimised informal settlements	New shantytowns	Legitimised shantytowns
Location context	Suburban / peripheral	Suburban / peripheral	Central	Central
Risk of expulsion	High (eviction)	Low	Low or high (not significant)	High (gentrification)
Expected aspiration of residence	Permanent	Permanent	Transitory	Increasingly permanent (tenants and owners)
Motivation for community-led planning	High	Low	Low	High
Community priorities	Securing tenure	Household economy, housing improvement	Household economy, savings	Securing tenure
Motivation for state-led planning	Low	High	Low	High
Government priorities	Not legitimising illegal occupations	Formalisation, integration and upgrading	Not legitimising illegal occupations / unwilling to invest in transitory housing	Formalisation, integration and upgrading

Discussion

Risk of expulsion is a key factor that motivated community mobilisation

Risk of expulsion and tenure insecurity do not only foster informality, but improve it, making informality more organised and informed. This study supports the claim that informality partially compensates for the inefficiency of the formal, and therefore cannot be seen as something negative or abnormal (Roy, 2005; Altrock, 2012).

Risks of expulsion concern settlements in both peripheral and central locations. In typology 1, illegal occupations extend the city outwards. The occupants attempt to legitimise their land tenure by imitating formally planned suburban subdivisions. In these cases, the imitation of planning materialises primarily in their physical form through applying the formal urban codes in the layouts of their settlements. In typology 4, communities in centrally located shantytowns engage in planning as a strategy to defend their right to stay and negotiate protections from market-driven expulsion and gentrification driven by formalisation, speculation and rising real-estate values. Here, the imitation of planning relates more to the process of shared decision-making about the future of the already built settlement. In both cases, improving infrastructure and services have been important, but not prioritised over securing tenure rights.

When illegal occupants secure their right to stay (typology 2), priorities shift from collective actions that aim at securing tenure to addressing individual housing and economic needs, a phenomenon that was also documented by Gilbert and Ward (1985): residents focus less on the neighbourhood and more on the workplace and home.

The documented manifestations of informality are mainly supplementary (Altrock, 2012). Instead of filling the gaps left by planning codes and regulations, the informal practices and governing systems in informal settlements and shantytowns replace formal rules, policies, and standards, which are not enforced or fail to ensure social order and prosperity. Insecurities and informality arise from unrealistically high expectations for housing and urban development, creating gaps between policy and reality that planners struggle to address. This aligns with the claims about prohibitive housing and infrastructure standards made by Turner (1972, 1976) and Echavarria et al. (2021).

The community-driven urban planning processes summarised in typologies 1 and 4 resemble the bottom-up planning documented also in other contexts (see Hamdi, 2004; de Souza, 2006; Holston, 2009; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2015; Shrestha & Aranya, 2015; Kaika, 2017). There is, however, little agreement about whether such housing strategies should be called 'heroic' or 'criminal'. It would be unwise to label these bottom-up and informal pre-planning attempts and decisions as 'good planning'. We should, therefore, not romanticise the way in which low-income communities mobilise around planning. It shall be emphasised that it is more often an act of desperation in face of high tenure insecurity than a deliberate process that aims at improving living conditions.

Expected aspiration of residence matters

Community interest in planning is minimal in areas with transitory housing (typology 3). The state would only initiate planning work in settlements recognised as permanent, but not before they are no longer sentenced to forced eviction or designated for massive eradication (typologies 2 and 4). The consulted planners claimed that planning in settlements which from

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the beginning were intended as places for permanent living (typologies 1 and 2) is easier than in the chaotic inner-city shantytowns (typologies 3 and 4).

The sequence of informal development does not align with state-led planning

Communities in informal housing and the state have different motivations and priorities for planning, even when both agree on its necessity. For organised communities in typologies 1 and 4, the main priorities are guarantees to secure tenure and prevent gentrification, while government planning agencies focus on formalisation, integration, and upgrading (typologies 2 and 4). In typology 1 and 2, one side may consider planning as important while the other finds it inconvenient. These differences cause conflicts and, as in typology 4, may lead to the emergence of two parallel planning processes. Only in typology 3, where housing is transitory, neither the community nor the state initiates planning interventions.

The conflicts are manifested by disagreements about what should happen and in which order. The most critical point of conflict in planning that remains constant in all four typologies is whether formalisation of ownership should come first or last. Communities typically demand tenure security first but prefer to delay formalisation to avoid the costs of mortgage repayment under insecure economic conditions. In contrast, governments usually prioritise formalising property ownership before making spatial interventions and infrastructure improvements. This finding confirms the observation made over 50 years ago by Turner (1972), who claimed that the urban poor prioritise access to unskilled jobs and the ability to save, while formal ownership and high living standards imposed by the state institutions are not preferred and may even be inconvenient if they contribute to increased expenditures.

The presented case studies suggest that the act of formalisation produces informality (Roy, 2005; Altrock, 2012). In Buenos Aires, the main issue with formalisation is the high chance of unaffordability of housing and services, countering de Soto's (2001) argument that property formalisation of tenure unlocks financial capital and leads to prosperity. This unaffordability, influenced by location and land value, can cause gentrification and displacement of vulnerable groups to less desirable areas, as many scholars have warned (Payne 2002, Roy, 2005; Payne et al., 2009; van Lindert, 2016; Satterthwaite, 2020).

Following this, the paper's findings support the theory that informal development tends to occur in reverse order compared to the formal housing process, where tenure is secured first and housing occupation is the final step (McLeod, 2001; de Paula et al., 2010; Hamdi, 2010; see Figure 1). However, instead of seeing development as a linear process from informality to formality (or reverse), the process can change directions, meaning that the formalisation process can be countered by informalisation.

In the presented case areas, such a reversion into informalisation happened primarily when efforts to formalise housing tenure or infrastructure connections were slow and imposed unaffordable rates (or fear of them). This justified the more informal access as free or cheaper and therefore a more convenient option for the users and de facto property owners. In other words, urban spaces and activities *informalise* as a conscious strategy by the poor to maximise their saving capacities (Turner, 1972).

Since informality supports the goals of the low-income families in Argentina, most formalisation efforts attempted by the government often face opposition and mistrust. This can sometimes lead to 'grassroots' (de Souza, 2006), or 'insurgent' planning (Miraftab, 2009). However, this paper found that imitating formalisation or showing capability with formal rules and regulations

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(as in spatial planning) may be done strategically by the residents in informal settlements to reduce their tenure insecurity. Such insecurity is lower in settlements that are somewhat legitimised (or protected from eviction) and at the same time, allowed to maintain their informal economic and tenure structures. This indicates that urban spaces can be seen as continuums of complex overlaps of insecurities and formal and informal practices (Altrock, 2012).

Insecurities in development and the status of informality may increase when definitions of precarity and minimum acceptable housing conditions evolve, as they have historically (Gilbert, 2007). The findings from Buenos Aires confirm this observation. Despite gradual improvement of living standards, many of the studied settlements continue to be considered informal due to updated terminology and raised legal expectations that attempt to classify and formalise marginalised settlements. The status of some social housing estates has even been downgraded to informal due to deterioration, chronic poverty and rising minimum housing standards. The state of temporary tolerance for these informal occupations without guarantees for permanent residence resembles what Yiftachel (2009) called the 'permanent temporariness' in 'gray spaces'.

A better definition of rights is needed to reduce tenure insecurity

Tenure-related conflicts and insecurity are largely caused by misleadingly formulated and applied rights to housing and property. While informal and illegal occupations are motivated primarily by desperation and lack of housing alternatives, leaders who organise such acts of civil disobedience are aware of the larger ideological conflict that they are part of. Until the contradictions as well as inconsistency in interpretation and enforcement of the rights to housing and property are resolved, occupants will have to make plans and negotiate tenure rights, each of them separately for their own settlement. This need for clarification of rights concerns both those who claim ownership and the tenants.

Conclusions

This article analyses how tenure insecurity has been changing across time in informal settlements and shantytowns. Empirical research in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, with three focused case study areas was guided by a research question of *how economic and tenure insecurities impact the planning and development of informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires*. The analysis showed how the bottom-up planning initiatives led by local community leaders and activists are often motivated by the fact that imitation of or engagement with formal planning regulations and codes usually increase the perceived tenure security for residents in these settlements.

If and when security from eviction is achieved or when households who occupy these lands do not aspire to stay in these areas in the long-term, planning efforts might be, however, ignored or even rejected. In such situations households may refocus their priorities on livelihood strategies and savings. In this context, community leaders can be perceived as political actors and de facto planners, who attempt to address tenure and economic insecurities in their areas of influence.

Informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires are characterised by gaps where the intentions and actions, as well as the known and unknown aspects for the community, and planners or decision-makers representing the state are different and often not aligned:

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- Needs, motivations and priorities for people with low-income are constantly changing and most of the time contradict the goals of planning and visions of modernism, which also tend to shift due to political changes and preferences.
- Paths towards achieving future aspirations of communities and individuals do not follow the pre-established urban development standards and expectations of what a house should do and be like before habitation.
- The order in which informal development happens does not align and may even work in reverse with state-led planning processes.
- Attempts of formalisation contradict the pragmatic advantages of informalisation.
- Rights to dignified housing contradict rights to private property.
- Vertical and horizontal governance structures and participation systems are not compatible.
- Contextual knowledge does not comply with technical and generic knowledge.
- The impacts of corrupt, clientelist, and opportunistic practices may be positive or negative for certain groups, depending on connections, power relations, commercial interests and political circumstances.

Planners who work in informal settlements and shantytowns need to recognise these gaps and explore their contextual natures. Only then can they develop effective approaches and policies that would address the insecurities and improve the situation of the people living there. Acknowledging and integrating informal development within mainstream planning, especially during economic crises, is crucial. Doing otherwise would only magnify informality and create room for new illegal housing and land access practices.

Though these empirical findings are specific to Buenos Aires, the idea of developing typologies to analyse planning processes in informal settlements can be a useful diagnostic tool for researchers and planners in other contexts. Further research should examine planning standards and regulations towards access to affordable housing, their enforcement, and their impact on reducing informal and illegal housing strategies. The problem of the legal contradictions and synergies between the rights to housing and property, as well as the complex relationship between housing access and employment also deserve more attention.

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